

Elisavet Ioannidou, “Neo-Victorian Visions of the Future: Science, Crime, and Modernity.” *Victoriographies* 8.2 (2018): 187-205.

The nineteenth century saw the rise of industrialization and its effects on human production and consumption. Luddite textile workers and weavers once furiously resisted the deployment of machines within factories and expressed their prescient fears of how such innovations might diminish the demand for skilled laborers. However, the creation of many factory-based technologies, such as water wheels and turbines, steam engines, and gas power, were the result of the practical applications of scientific knowledge for commercial purposes. More recent developments in science and technology have exacerbated contemporary fears of nuclear energy, human cloning, cybercrime, biological terrorism, and infrastructural violence. Although our concerns may proportionally dwarf those of our Victorian forbearers, we have not proved ourselves any wiser or more competent in resolving them. We share a common fear of how science and technology may be malevolently deployed with catastrophic and irreversible consequences.

Elisavet Ioannidou considers how “[t]he abuse of science by neo-Victorian villains presents a criminal past that will give birth to a dystopian future” (188). She evaluates how steampunk films and novels, such as Guy Ritchie’s *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011), Christopher Nolan’s *The Prestige* (2006), and Brian Augustyn and Eduardo Barreto’s “Batman: Master of the Future” (1991), address nineteenth-century fears from a contemporary perspective. Through close readings of the visual texts, she argues that “ethically contestable applications of science and technology are not a neo-Victorian innovation” (189). She theorizes how the deleterious effects of the Industrial Revolution (for example, poverty, overcrowding, child labor, sexual exploitation, and drunkenness) provided the conditions necessary for producing fictional villains, whose progressive modernist plans for the future masked their antagonistic stance toward society.

Adverse social conditions “fuel[ed] new controversies,” (190) as Ioannidou points out, and also inspired the neo-Victorian villain’s vision of modernity, which justified his “malevolent applications of science and technology” (197). Borrowing from Marxist Humanist philosopher Marshall Howard Berman’s (1940-2013) theories on the possibilities and limitations of modernity, she asserts that “the price for being modern is not always incontestably affordable” (202), as indicated by the aftereffects of industrialization and warfare. She considers the ways in which “Victorian science [was] commodified” as the “tool of domination” (195) for villainous characters such as Lord Blackwood, Professor James Moriarty, Robert Angier, and Alexandre LeRoi. Each of these characters portray and promote a misguided faith in scientific and technological progress that is suggested by their common “conceptualization of progress as a move forwards, [and] towards the future” (196). Even in defeat, their “[anachronistic] plots and inventions live on and find practical application in the twentieth century” (197).

The villains are made complete because their scientific theories and technological inventions survive, evolve, and are transformed by the fears and demands of the present. As Ioannidou concludes, “the villains’ awareness of their contribution to the idea of progress situates them at the intersection between past and present, between the Victorian

era's relative consciousness of its modernity and the twentieth- and twenty-first-century certainty that this was actually the case" (196).

Ioannidou substantiates how the selected works represent the nineteenth century as historical fiction. In so doing, they reimagine aspects of the Victorian era from perspectives cultivated within the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. Retrospective knowledge allows us to borrow meanings and values from the past to inform our decision-making processes in the present. Ioannidou indicates that "[a]s the efforts of neo-Victorian detective-like characters to stop the villain unfold the past, they ultimately also dismantle and dissect the notion of modernity and thus allow for the examination of its meaning and qualities" (202). Ioannidou does not mention that the Sherlock Holmes films feature alternative versions of characters and events which do not disrupt the actual continuity of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's canonical stories. Instead, these adaptations are temporally sealed within the present and are unable to perform a fundamental aspect of historical fiction, which is to introduce critical self-reflection.

Ioannidou may have enriched her argument further by drawing from Benjamin Poore's anthology *Neo-Victorian Villains: Adaptations and Transformations in Popular Culture* (2017), which examines the representations of villainous types in various fictional works. Neither Ioannidou's selected works nor her critical insights provide neo-Victorian examples of villainous women, which would have added another theoretical layer to her argument. Instead, we can only speculate as to where women might be situated within neo-Victorian villainy. Ioannidou offers insightful commentary on how "neo-Victorian scientific crime manifest nineteenth-century scientific and technological progress" (187) as fictional primers for resolving the pervasive anxieties of the present day.

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